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ABSTRACT

An examination of the Russian reading program, this report first describes the nature of American interest in Soviet education. Sections 3, 4, and 5 then present overviews of the Soviet cultural context, the structure of the Russian language, and the organization of the Soviet school system. Section 6 discusses the course of language study from grade 1 through grade 10, and section 7 suggests that Soviet teaching methods are guided by efforts to consolidate and test knowledge and to promote practical skills and habits. In discussing the theoretical and methodological foundations of reading instruction, section 8 indicates the importance of phonetic analysis in elementary school reading and writing instruction. Section 9 advances the view that the goal of the Soviet reading program is to create talented readers, and sections 10 and 11 present Soviet instructional strategies for teaching reading and describe the bukvar, or Russian primer. Section 12 examines the literature and grammar texts in the system and section 13 attempts to evaluate the reading achievement of Soviet students. In the final 2 sections it is concluded that Soviet schools offer children quality education, and that schools in the United States cannot afford to offer their students any less. (MM)

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THE RUSSIAN READING PROGRAM: A RE-EXAMINATION

A Major Address Presented at the Seventeenth New York State Reading Association Conference

November 10, 1983

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ABSTRACT

The Russian Reading Program: A Re-examination

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The 1957 launching of Sputnik ignited the debate on the presumed merits and demerits of the American school reading program. Comparisons of that program with the Russian school reading program were made followed by charges and counter-charges. Language and cultural differences created difficulty in arriving at a clear understanding of the problem. This address briefly examines the Soviet cultural setting and the Russian language. It provides a review of the Soviet school system and its curriculum organization. General teaching methods are explained while the theoretical and methodological foundations of Russian reading instruction are reviewed. In addition, instructioanl strategies for teaching reading are presented. The "bukvár'" or ABC book(primer) is described with an analysis of the formal school reading and language program following. Consideration is given to Russian pupil achievement in reading. Conclusions are drawn and several implications for USA education and educators are presented. The work is supported by an extensive bibliography of American and Soviet sources.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since the 1957 launching of Sputnik a great debate has raged over the quality of American education as compared to that offered in the Soviet Union. Could it be that this once-peasant and barely literate nation was overtaking the advanced United States in education as well as in science and technology? A first official delegation sent to the U.S.S.R. in 1959 by the United States Office of Education reached the devastating conclusion that Russian pupils, in many respects, were better educated than American pupils.[1] In that same year a delegation of 64 United States educators,[2] mostly school administrators, spent nearly a month in Soviet classrooms. They drew no comparisons between Soviet and United States education; however, they reached many conclusions regarding Soviet education. A few of those conclusions were as follows:

1. The dedication of both Soviet teachers and their students to education as a means of achieving both Soviet and personal objectives is impressive.

2. The main goal of Soviet education is to produce people who are physically strong, who are imbued with the spirit of communist morality, and who are prepared for active participation in the achievement of communism.

3. All classroom activities are conducted in a rigid, authoritarian manner and discipline is firm.

4. The ultimate responsibility for discipline rests with the parents; they must see that their children behave properly, or they are called before a parents' committee to explain the causes of misconduct.

5. There is a very small percentage of failures among Soviet students, generally not more than 3 or 4 percent. Those who fail are given a second chance for promotion by studying through the summer and passing an examination that is given before the end of summer vacation.[3]

A 1967 cross-national study[4] involving 12 comparable highly industrialized countries revealed that the United States was at the bottom of international mathematics achievement. A similar study of science achievement[5] involving 19 countries revealed that the United States was also at the bottom of international science achievement. No comparable measures of mathematics and science achievement for Soviet and American pupils, however, were included in the above studies presumably due to lack of access to Soviet data.

Nicholas Daniloff,[6] Moscow correspondent for the widely read U. S. News & World Report, asserted in a recent issue of that magazine that Russian pupils seem to outclass American graduates. Soviet high schoolers, he wrote, graduate with a wider exposure to mathematics, science and foreign languages than do graduates of United States schools.

II. THE GREAT READING DEBATE

The great debate in reading was ignited by Arther Trace[7] in 1961. The flames of that debate waxed and waned ever since. Trace concluded that the reading success achieved by American children was not a result of using basal readers with

their limited vocabularies but a result of using other sources. He recommended that basic readers adopted in the U. S. elementary school have a vocabulary of not less than 10,000 words at the sixth-grade level.[8] He also concluded that U. S. students did not acquire an adequate knowledge of American, English and world literature from typical textbooks through the tenth grade.[9] At the elementary level Trace recommended those basic readers be adopted which reflected the rich literary heritage offered in the English language. At the junior-high level he recommended literature textbooks and paperbacks introducing the lives and works of the best American and English authors. Here students should be introduced to a systematic study of literary theory, literary types, literary movements, literary chronology, and literary history. At the senior-high-school level Trace recommended a required twelfth-grade course in world literature.[10] In comparing American and Russian reading texts he critically stated:

> . . . there is no escaping the conclusion that the textbooks used in our grade schools and junior high schools present English as if it were an impoverished language, as if it had no literary heritage and no literary significance, and as if our children were mentally defective.[11]

In his later work, Reading Without Dick and Jane[12] published in 1965, Trace acknowledged a vastly improved reading program in U. S. schools as a result of textbook industry efforts. The vocabulary control, the look-and-guess method,

and worthless selections were being replaced by newer readers which utilized a basic phonics approach, introduced a larger vocabulary, and offered highly rewarding selections.

Rebuttals to Trace's arguments and pedagogical excuses were advanced by Arthur Gates, the Wesleys, and Suetta Story. Gates,[13] in a 1962 writing, reported that U. S. children read better than two decades prior. Vocabulary, speed, accuracy of reading, and level of reading comprehension showed substantial improvement over earlier testing. He underscored the point that intensive phonics instruction was not more effective in teaching children to read. Other studies cited by Gates gave evidence to large reading vocabularies among U. S. children thus contradicting Trace's contentions.

Frank and Mary Rose Wesley[14] noted that American English was non-phonetic thus hindering Johnny's and Jane's efforts in learning to read. In their view the correct solution to that problem was recognized by textbook publishers who correctly adopted a controlled vocabulary in their reading series. Ivan's and Masha's Russian language, on the other hand, contended the Wesleys' was phonetic thus leading to their reading success. In her limited 1966 study of first graders Suetta Story[15] asserted that U. S. children knew many more words than just those presented in basal readers. At the end of grade one, according to Story, those words totalled 2,124 plus the 400 found in the basal text used. Trace[16] recommended that adopted basic readers consist of

not less than 2,000 words at the second grade. By Story's calculations U. S. children's word knowledge exceeded Trace's recommended target by over 500 words.

In his 1981 publication, Why Johnny Still Can't Read: A New Look at the Scandal of Our Schools, Viennese-born Rudolph Flesch[17] blamed Johnny's and Jane's reading failure on teachers. Flesch asserted that teachers, in following the advice of professional educators, incorrectly used the look-say method rather than the better phonics-first method. As a result, Flesch so proclaimed, mass miseducation in the United States abounds and the country is "rapidly sinking into a morass of ignorance."[18]

The continuing battle cry against the "look-say method" and for "phonics-first" has been recently raised by Samuel Blumenfeld[19] in his stinging article, "The Victims of 'Dick and Jane,'" published only a few months ago in American Education, the journal of the United States Department of Education. Blumenfeld contended that "the vast majority of American children are trapped within a [reading] system that is turning their brains into macaroni."[20]

The purpose of this address is not to engage in an acrimonious debate about whether Ivan reads better than Johnny or whether "look-say" is superior or inferior to "phonics-first" but rather to examine objectively and rationally the present Russian reading program. Is the Russian

reading program turning Russian children's and youths' brains into cabbage or into caviar? The judgment will be yours to make.

III. THE SOVIET CULTURAL SETTING

The U.S.S.R., approximately 2-1/2 times as large as the United States, is the largest country in the world. It is a multi-cultural and multi-lingual nation with some 170 reported ethnic groups including the Slavic Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, non-Slavic Estonians, Lithuanians, Latvians, Moldavians, Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaidzhani, Turkmen, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kirghizs, Tadzhiks plus countless other minor nationalities. The Russians, or "rússkie," comprise slightly more than one half of the total population of about 270 million. Their language is most widespread and is taught as a second language to non-Russians.[21] School instruction is conducted in one or more of the 57 languages of the peoples of the U.S.S.R.[22]

IV. THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

Russian, as English, is an alphabetic language and a member of the Indo-European family of languages. Its alphabet, known as the Cyrillic alphabet, was named after the ninth century Bulgarian monk St. Cyril who in 863 A.D. reputedly devised it. Consisting of 33 symbols of Greek and a few specially created letters, it includes 20 consonants, five hard and five soft vowels, a semi-vowel, a soft sign or

"myákhki znak," and a hard sign or "tvyórdi znak."[23] The 33 Russian letters represent all the sounds which in other languages with fewer letters must be formed by a combination of two or more letters. Russian words contain no letters that are not pronounced. As a result, a student of Russian who learns to recognize and pronounce each letter of the alphabet could read Russian fluently even before fully understanding the text. However, the absence of fixed rules for accenting syllables is one of the difficulties of the language.[24] Arther Trace pointed out that "sheer common sense dictates that [Russian] students be taught the phonics of their language as soon as possible."[25] He acknowledged that English, German, Spanish, and other members of the Indo-European family of languages are also phonetic, though some are more highly phonetic than others.[26] As affirmed by the Wesleys,[27] each letter in the Russian language, with very few exceptions, stands for one sound only. This relationship remains constant and is not affected by word meaning nor in what relationship the letter stands to other letters in the word. Such a phonetic constancy leads to invaluable educational advantages. Once Ivan and Masha learn a rule of pronunciation, they can apply it in all future linguistic work without needing to learn subsequent rules which overrule the previous rules. The exact amount of learning time Ivan and Masha save by the use of a completely phonetic system is difficult to assess. The Wesleys estimated several

years' more time, thus placing Ivan and Masha at least two years ahead of Johnny and Jane. Because of its phonic regularity, so noted Gertrude Hildreth,[28] dividing a word by syllables is easier in Russian than in English.

Learning to recognize the letters and their corresponding sounds and ease of syllabication concludes one's study of "simplified" Russian. Now the task becomes more formidable. Russian, as Latin and German, is a highly inflected language with six case endings or declensions including the nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, and prepositional. Numbers are singular and plural while genders are masculine, feminine, and neuter. This means that the Russian child must be able to read, spell, and decline twelve forms of nouns, adjectives, and numerals for singular and plural number. Adverbs, thank goodness, are non-declinable. However, adverbs are expressed in various degrees as comparative or superlative. Thus we can now understand that learning Russian involves complexities and complications. Additionally, Russian verbs present a mastery problem. Conjugation, of course, is a necessity. Verbs can be intransitive, transitive, or reflexive. As in English the tenses may be present, past, future, or conditional while the forms or aspects "vídi" are twofold: imperfective and perfective. The imperfective aspect of the verb denotes continuation or repetition of action while the perfective aspect denotes completion or limited duration of

the described action. In our overview of the structure of the Russian language we must not overlook moods, participles, or gerunds nor the specifics of phonetics, morphology, and syntax (sentence structure).[29] All of the above particulars are carefully taught to Russian children and youth. Such particulars must be learned fully by them in order to develop a solid command of their language, so greatly enriched since the days of Alexander Pushkin.

V. THE SOVIET SCHOOL SYSTEM: ITS ORGANIZATION

The first link in the Soviet system of public education consists of the preschool establishments, i.e., day nurseries and kindergartens or combined nursery-kindergartens.[30] The nurseries serve infants from two or three months to three years of age. They are divided into three groups with their own teacher and a nanny. Children from three to seven years of age attend kindergartens which also are divided into three age groups. Each group has its scientifically based schedule designed to meet the child's needs in mental, moral, physical, and aesthetic development. The senior group, six to seven years of age, is prepared for school. Here, in daily classes of 40-50 minutes, children are taught to read and do simple sums. They learn to speak well at an early age and to express themselves in various art forms.[31] William Durr,[32] former president of the International Reading Association, reported that approximately 50 per cent of the beginning first graders

in the cities have some reading ability based on U.S.S.R. Ministry of Education estimates.

Compulsory education of 10 years duration begins at seven years of age. The school is divided into three stages: elementary school (grades 1, 2, and 3), incomplete secondary (grades 4-8), and full secondary (grades 9 and 10).[33] Most children receive 10 years of schooling; however, particularly in rural areas, general schooling can be from seven to 10 years.[34]

In the elementary schools (grades 1, 2, and 3) studies are usually conducted by one teacher while in the older classes (grades 4 through 10), a teacher-specialist in a given field of knowledge conducts instruction of individual subjects. One class usually consists of not more than 30 pupils.[35]

The typical elementary school will display a picture of Lenin, a large-sized abacus, color charts, picture cards relating an alphabet letter to the sound it represents, and a large pocket chart allowing children to create stories using flash cards or letters. The black or brown chalkboard extends across the front of the room. In some rooms, a chart displaying upper and lower case Cyrillic letters is displayed. Children are seated two-by-two in rigid rows facing front. There are no interest centers in the room for free activities.[36] School attendance is every day except

Sunday. Pupils in grades 1, 2, and 3 have four 45-minute lessons while senior pupils have five or six lessons with recesses extending from 10 to 20 minutes.[37]

Homework, calling for independent effort, is a permanent feature of Soviet education. It serves as an important means for consolidating knowledge and helping pupils develop individual study habits. Homework might consist of reading an assigned paragraph or section, a written assignment in Russian grammar, or composing an essay. Teachers and school administrators regulate the amount and difficulty of homework. In the first grade up to one hour is permissible while in grades 8, 9, and 10 up to four hours of homework is permissible.[38]

VI. CURRICULUM ORGANIZATION

The Soviet school curriculum is highly organized having been drawn up by a special board of the U.S.S.R. Academy of Sciences and the U.S.S.R. Academy of Pedagogical Sciences with active participation of well-known scholars, outstanding teachers, and methodologists. Eighteen different subjects plus free-choice optional subjects for grades 6, 7, 8, and 9 are specified for a certain number of hours per week by grade. Nothing is left to chance. The improved curriculum was brought about by the introduction of universal compulsory ten-year education and by the rapid advance of science and technology.

The course of language study for the elementary school, grades 1-3, includes the following: grammar, reading, spelling, speech development, penmanship, and the fundamentals of composition. In reading classes the children are taught to read aloud, both expressively and quickly. A love of books is instilled here. Grammar lessons provide the fundamentals of grammatical structure with emphasis placed on expressing one's thoughts logically and well.

Secondary education, as was mentioned, covers grades 4 through 10. The study of Russian in those grades includes phonetics, lexicology which relates to the vocabulary of a language, word building, grammar (morphology and syntax), spelling, punctuation, speech, composition, rudiments of stylistics and some general information on linguistics. Literature, at this level, furthers the learner's aesthetic and moral development. Literature also encourages the formation of a materialist (Marxist) world outlook and promotes a taste for art. The elementary course of literature, grades 4 to 7, presents literary works as a work of art and reviews basic genres. Pupils are taught to read aloud in an expressive manner and develop good reading habits. The advanced course, 8th to 10th grades, approaches literature from an historic and literary point of view. Emphasis is placed on a given writer's development and the social and artistic value of his work. Lectures on the theory of literature are also presented. Works are discussed and analyzed in class as well as for

extensive home reading.[39] The school curriculum serves as the teacher's program schedule for the year. Prior to the beginning of school, each teacher divides his/her time to correspond with the various study themes of the program schedule. A detailed plan for each theme is developed indicating the amount of laboratory or other type of practical work to be done as well as excursions and tests. Such a detailed plan, in the view of Soviet educators, helps the teacher prepare for each lesson, guarantees a systematic study of the subject, and the most rational use of class time.[40] It is quite obvious from the above description that curricular content and learning experiences for Russian children and youth are not left to chance but are decided upon on the basis of mature professional judgments and careful planning.

VII. GENERAL TEACHING METHODS

After experimenting with various teaching methods based on the principles of Soviet didactics, the classroom-type lesson was found to be the most applicable. Here a permanent group of children who comprise a single class take all their lessons together whether in the classroom, in the labs, workshop, or school gymnasium. It is the teacher's task to inculcate knowledge most effectively through use of varied methods and the thorough organization of each lesson. The necessary components of the learning process are twofold:

(1) the consolidation and testing of knowledge, and (2) the acquisition of practical skills and habits. Regardless of the subject being studied, all lessons serve several purposes. They increase a learner's thirst for knowledge, teach the learner to be organized, disciplined and persistent, and lastly, feel responsible for the work with which he or she has been entrusted. The goal is a high standard of education. The Soviet school of pedagogics aims at developing each child's mental capacity, ability to think logically, to concentrate, and to be imaginative. To help achieve quality learning, the teacher uses a variety of visual aids, textbook illustrations, classroom experiments, educational films and radio, TV, linguaphone rooms, and even computers.[41]

VIII. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF READING INSTRUCTION

Let us now examine the theoretical and methodological foundations of Soviet reading instruction. One of the first statements about Soviet pedagogics made to visiting U. S. educational delegations is that every Soviet child is capable of learning providing the child is normal. Should the child not learn, the fault then lies with the teacher.

Premises about the Russian reading program, as explained by Daniel Ungaro,[42] are based on the research of Kornei Chukovsky, D. B. Elkonin, and Lev Vygotsky. Russian psychologists and linguists have been greatly influenced by Vygotsky's work entitled Thought and Language. His theory

holds that "a word is the microcosm of human consciousness."[43] This thesis is thoroughly practiced in the elementary reading program, grades 1, 2, and 3. Vygotsky also asserted that "it is the internalization of external dialogue that brings the powerful tool of language to bear on the stream of thought."[44]

Chukovsky's work, From Two to Five, is thought to have greatest effect upon the Russian elementary level reading program. His most important point is that a wide open two-channel communication between the child and the human environment is the very core of the development of oral language. Chukovsky's work is filled with examples of children's thoughts and language illustrating that "internalization" is the key to words, letters, sounds, and language.[45]

In the new Russian elementary school program for teaching reading and writing the ideas of phonetic analysis are predominant. Phonetic analysis, concerned with the sequence of sounds in a word, is both analytical and synthetical, i.e., tearing apart and putting together. Speech skills become fundamental in this teaching. The Russian child must recognize the phonetic structure of words, the construction of sentences, and the connected text. Much instructional time is devoted to practical exercises which aim at developing grammatical skills and orthographic habits. Children are guided in mastering modes of thinking and in forming intelligible and figurative situations and feelings. They are also being prepared for independent reading and writing.[46]

IX. THE AIM OF THE RUSSIAN READING PROGRAM

Miriam Morton[47] recognized that the aim of the Soviet reading program was to develop a "talented reader." This concept of the "talented reader" entered into Soviet pedagogy during the middle 1930's. It was formulated by the children's poet Samuel Marshak who believed that the reader, as the writer, is also an artist seeking to be creative. In Marshak's view a "talented reader" must develop a love of books, acquire a sensitivity to the best prose and poetry, respect and admire the special talent and labor of the author, try his or her hand at authorship, or at least join a literary circle.

Morton believed that such an elite reader in the Soviet school was developed through a uniform and systematic school curriculum offering outstanding writing of folk and classical literature. This excellent literary fare begins with poetry and prose written and translated for pre-schoolers. It continues with school readers and literature textbooks throughout the ten-year school. A child's interest in reading is further nourished in the literary circles which are voluntary clubs meeting once a week for two hours. Such clubs function in schools, in Pioneer recreational centers, in children's neighborhood and central libraries, in Houses of Cultures, in children's sections of industrial and professional unions, and in recreational centers of large city housing complexes.

X. INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING READING

The standard instructional strategy applied by the Soviet teacher involves all children within a particular classroom using the same book at the same time. The "bukvár'" or primer is to be completed by first graders by December 15, a previously set date applied throughout the Soviet Union.[48] Individual differences are accommodated both during group and individual study. Rapid learners are assigned more difficult tasks while slower children receive simplified assignments. Both sets of tasks follow the standardized curriculum and provide for mastery of its basic content. However, the results will show a varying degree of excellence. Those children who fall behind receive instruction in special classes conducted on a strictly individual basis which help them catch up with their classmates as quickly as possible.[49]

In decoding words at the beginning level of instruction, Durr and Hickman[50] identified certain techniques of instruction. No words were taught by the "sight method" but rather the emphasis was placed on learning individual letter-sound associations. Secondly, as the letter-sound association was learned, children used it in reading words. Thirdly, the sounding stress was on syllables although individual letter-sounds were taught. Teachers guided children from the whole word to the syllable and then to the phoneme. Fourthly, associations were strengthened through activities proceeding from the sound to the symbol as well as from the symbol to

the sound. Mastery of letter-sound associations were emphasized in approximately half of each school day where a 45-minute period was devoted to reading and where another 45-minute period was devoted to writing. During the writing period first graders used fountain pens copying cursively from the "bukvár'" into their notebooks. Children constructed stories in the pocket chart at their seats by using small, individual letter cards. Children also wrote from teacher dictation. Such varied activities and established time allotments directly built reading abilities. Fifthly, through teacher-led discussion and questioning, comprehension was developed. As children proceeded through the first three grades, the depth of discussion deepened. At the first grade children simply may retell details. At grade two they may summarize a selection while, at grade three, children may analyze story plot and character. Formal reading instruction stopped at the conclusion of grade three.

As noted by Thall,[51] teaching methods in reading depend on the nature of the native language and the relationship between its orthography and phonology. If there was consistent grapheme-phoneme correspondence, then a greater impetus for a phonics approach to reading was indicated. Russian orthography, as earlier stated, quite accurately reflects the phonology of the language. This phonics approach to beginning Russian reading is dropped when proficiency has presumably been reached. Such procedure is in marked

contrast to many U. S. "sight" basal readers. Phonics is introduced after reading has begun which, according to Thall, is a seemingly less logical procedure.

XI. THE "BUKVÁR'"

The first book Russian and other Soviet children receive at school is the "bukvár'," also referred to in English as the "ABC Book" or primer. The word "bukvár'" is derived from the word "búkva" or alphabet letter. Yearly printing of the "bukvár'" in the Russian language alone totals 3.4 million copies. Non-Russian nationalities receive a copy of the "bukvár'" in their own language. Printing is in 58 languages of the Soviet Union.[52]

The latest (1978) edition,[53] size 6-5/8" x 8-3/4", consists of 103 pages. Inserted in the primer is a large chart of individual Russian letters which are to be cut out by children and used by them in word formation. Also included with the "bukvár'" are three colored picture charts depicting various subjects as a rooster, keys, umbrella, or persons engaged in different activities. These picture charts are used for language development. The children associate the picture with the dots or letters underneath each picture thus building their letter and word recognition skills.

The first six pages of the "bukvár'" are devoted to a series of pictures useful in oral language development. Next follows the introduction of all the letters and sounds of the

Russian language in a sequential series of lessons until all 33 letters and sounds are learned. The letters are not introduced in standard alphabetical order but in a psychologically sound learning order. Letters are blended into vowels which are practiced and reinforced. The first series of vowels practiced and learned are "ma," "mu," "sha," "shu," "ra," and "ru." The vowels are then combined into words as "máma," "Másha," "ráma," "Shúra," "Sásha," and "mála." Note that all the stress accents are on the first syllable. Next, short sentences for reading are then formed wherein each word is separated in syllables. An example of such a two-word Russian sentence is "Sásha mála," or "Sasha is little."

The last letter introduced, and the least used in Russian, is the hard sign (tvórdi znak) found on page 84 of the primer. The remainder of the "bukvár'," to be completed by December 15 of grade one, consists mostly of one-page stories as "Grandmother is sleeping," "The Icebreaker Lenin," "Our Rocket," and finally the delightful selection entitled "The Primer's Holiday." In her analysis of the 1968 edition of the "bukvár'" Gertrude Hildreth[54] estimated a word count of 1000 different words counting variant forms of the same word and including children's names. Such words as Africa, rocket ship, quickly, engineer, lantern and others, contended Hildreth, furnished story content on the level of child interest and

comprehension. She also asserted that Russian children, upon completion of the "bukvár'," have learned all the letter-sound facts of their language, can recognize more than 150 syllables as units of sounds in words, can use principles of syllabication in word analysis, and have learned to recognize by sight a stock of the commonest and most interesting words.

Accompanying the "bukvár'" now is the 126-page book entitled "Spútnik bukvaryá," or "The Bukvar's Fellow-traveler," published in 1979. This colorful supplement provides additional reading exercises and exercises in phonetic analysis. The text includes poems, riddles, proverbs, sayings, folk tales, literary miniatures, logical exercises, and various stories for retelling.[55] The supplementary reader was designed to meet individual learning needs of pupils at various levels of preparation.[56] This supplementary text and the "bukvár'" reveal no systematic vocabulary control.

XII. THE FORMAL SCHOOL READING AND LANGUAGE PROGRAM

Upon completing the "bukvár'" and the "Sputnik of the Bukvár'" Russian children proceed to their first-grade reader, "Rodnáya rech'." This "uchébnik" or textbook contains 199 selections of stories and poems with a most comprehensive vocabulary. Teacher questions follow each story. Authors include Samuel Marshak, Yuri Gagarin, Constantine Ushinskii, Leo Tolstoy, and Alexander Pushkin. Similar-type readers in smaller print and a vocabulary of increasing difficulty are

used in grades 2 and 3. The selections are also arranged topically as "The life and work of Octobrists," "What is good and what is bad," "Here comes the frost, winter begins," "The Soviet army defends the motherland," "Glorious works of women of our land," "Lenin is with us," "For peace and friendship," and "Our motherland--the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics." These texts, with ample colored illustrations, are very attractive but formidable from the child's point of view.[57] Grade 4 begins a study of "Rodnáya literatúra," or "Native Literature."[58] Literature study extends through grade 10 for two to four periods per week depending upon the particular grade level.[59]

Accompanying the study of reading and native literature is the study of Russian grammar presented in the text series entitled "Rúss'kii yazík," or "Russian Language." Study of Russian extends from grade 1 through grade 9 with a diminishing time allotment throughout the grades balanced by an increase in literature study.[60] The first-grade content[61] consists of 316 writing exercises and readings dealing with letters, sounds, and words. A sample first-grade reading follows: "We studied the verses of Alexander Sergeievich Pushkin. Soon we will learn a fable by Ivan Andreievich Krylov. In our class Lena Sergieva and Yuri Fyodorov read verses well."[62]

Grade 2 study of the Russian language[63] follows logically from grade 1 and becomes progressively more difficult. Here

children study the nature of a sentence (subject and predicate), prefixes, suffixes, parts of speech, and verbs. There are writing lessons to be done cursively and with pen, oral reading exercises, original oral compositions, fill-in-the blanks, and dictations. A sample dictation written by S. Prokofiev entitled "Various Words" follows:

> Children, do you know what kind of words there are? Words are of different sorts: happy and sad, little and big.
>
> There also polite words: thank you, please, hello.
>
> There are very important words as: Octobrist, Pioneer, Communist, the Party, and peace.
>
> But the most important and dearest is - "Rodina."[64] (Motherland)

The Russian language text for grade 3[65] includes readings and exercises similar to those arranged for the younger grades but more intellectually demanding. The text includes pictures of artistic, social, folkloristic, and historical significance, a two-page dictionary, and an appendix. Children review the work of grades 1 and 2 and begin intensive study of nouns, pronouns, adjectives, and verbs. An excerpt entitled "Rain" by K. Paustovskii completes the language work of grade 3. Its translation follows:

> "Let us return to the rain. Many signs are connected with it. The sun sets in a rain cloud, smoke spreads out along the ground, the swallows fly low, the roosters at times are heard in the courtyard, the clouds stretch in the sky as hazy strands--all this are signs of rain. And shortly before the rain the gentle breathing of moisture is heard. It comes from there where the rains have already fallen.[66]

Grade 4, equivalent U. S. grade 5, begins the Soviet secondary school. The Russian language text for this grade[67]

focuses on grammatical knowledge, habits, and skill development. Detailed attention is given to syntax, punctuation, phonetic concepts and drills, pronunciation, vocabulary, word building, and morphology. Readings are interspersed throughout the text. This delightful and challenging text received first prize named in honor of Konstantine Ushinskii, noted tsarist Russian pedagogue. A typical love-of-nature story with a moral follows:

> Sánya and Ványa were returning home from school. They went through the woods. The woods became completely unfamiliar: neither reddish, nor greenish but whitish-grey. The tree trunks were snow-covered. The boys' feet go through the snow. And underneath the snow the dry leaves and pine needles crackle and rustle. Sánya took a twig and wrote something on the snow. Ványa looked and read "Sánya." "Just think," he said, "spring will come, the snow will melt and none of your letters will remain." Ványa then took a knife from his briefcase and on the trunk of a birch tree, he cut out the word, "Ványa." "Well this is another matter! And you wrote on the snow," he said. "You fool!" said Sánya. "Why?" replied the other. "Yes," explained Sánya, "people throughout life will walk by this birch tree and say, "What a fool that Ványa was!"[68]

However, not all stories found in Russian reading and language texts are as humorous as this one involving Sánya and Ványa. There are many compositions of a serious and most realistic nature dealing with heroism and tragedy during the 1917 October Revolution and the Great Patriotic War against Nazi invaders. Not only are children reminded of those terrible times and sacrifices made but they are also indoctrinated with political and ideological sentiments, feelings, and leanings. Communism and the Communist Party

are extolled and glorified while Vladimir Il'ich Lenin begins to emerge as a kindly positive hero on par with "Ded Moróz" or "Grandfather Frost" who distributes gifts and goodies to children around the traditional "yólka" or New Year's tree.

Formal Russian language instruction is completed after grade 9. Textbooks used in grades 5 through 9 continue along the didactic and academic lines described, however, at an increasingly complex and sophisticated level.

XIII. PUPIL ACHIEVEMENT IN READING

After all is said and done, what are the measurable results of the Russian reading program? What then, as they say in business, is the bottom line? Russian research data on pupil achievement in reading is difficult to obtain as such data do not readily appear in their pedagogical journals of which there are many. Soviet pedagogues Kuzin and Kolmakova[69] asserted that practically all children master the fundamental skills of reading and writing during the first 3-1/2-4 months of instruction. Hildreth[70] accepted that assertion in stating that 98 per cent of first graders were successful readers, scarcely two per cent were retardates. Successful readers, she commented, ranged beyond their age levels in story and informational material. By the end of grade 1 they were enjoying Russian literary classics.

Durr and Hickman[71] reported a failure rate of two to three per cent at the end of grade 1. Failing pupils were

referred to a medical commission for diagnosis. Should no medical reason be found for failure, it was expected that the teacher would insure the child's success the second time through grade 1. Official estimates predict only one-in-a-million chance that the child would be required to repeat a grade for a third time. Russian sources[72] pegged the level of achievement in the Russian language in the schools of the R.S.F.S.R. at 99.5 per cent for the 1975/76 academic year.

Soviet pedagogue Kurduimova[73] stated that, by the end of the third grade, those pupils with passing marks should be able to read without difficulty quite complex artistic texts. Specifically, fourth graders should be able to read aloud at the rate of 100 to 120 words per minute. Similarly, fourth graders should be able to read silently at the rate of 100 to 160 words per minute.

Documenting specific reading disabilities or reading failures in Russian educational journals has been difficult as realized by Mark Thall[74] and this investigator. Kurdiumova[75] acknowledged a slow reading rate among certain pupils. Those children, she stated, having difficulty in developing reading fluency faced serious obstacles in studying literature. Barrie Copp[76] reported a lack of availability of figures on the percentage of reading problems in the total population, this in spite of the great attention paid to diagnosis. He was told that approximately 12 per cent of the children experienced difficulty in learning the Russian

phonetic system. Copp believed that dyslexia (impairment of the ability to read), if searched for, existed in Russia as in other countries. As reported to Durr and Hickman,[77] Soviet educators discounted perceptual problems and low socioeconomic background as two correlates of reading difficulties. Soviet educational research concluded that no relationship between perceptual problems and socioeconomic background and reading existed.

What then are the reasons for Russian reading success? William Durr[78] believed that it lies in valuing education, in the conviction that education will succeed, and that all children will read. Perhaps we as American educators, so noted Daniel Ungaro, "have fallen into a trap which is helping to program many children to fail."[79]

XIV. CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions about the Russian reading program can then be drawn? Certainly, the Russian reading program is well-conceived and well-designed. It is rational, comprehensive, and pedagogically sound. This intellectually stimulating, meaningful, comprehensive, unified, and integrated approach to language learning creates an appreciation and love of the Russian written and spoken word, develops maturity in the reader, forms character, builds loyalty to the Soviet politico-ideological-economic system, forges a common Russian and Soviet culture, kindles patriotism, and

insures reverence toward the Soviet motherland where children are taught to be "on guard." Should all Russian children be able to master their readers and language texts, there is no doubt in this speaker's mind that they would have complete command of their great language in reading, speaking, spelling, writing, and listening. Such conclusions were echoed by Miriam Morton who wrote,

> . . . schoolchildren are developed in that country into highly discriminating (elite) readers of fine literature--folk, classical, and modern--native and foreign--and that this is accomplished within the framework of its mass education, . . . [80]

XV. IMPLICATIONS FOR U. S. A. EDUCATION AND EDUCATORS

What implications are there for us as American teachers, educators, researchers, scholars, authors, and textbook publishers as we re-examine the Russian reading program? Are we, as Blumenfeld charged, turning American children's reading brains into macaroni? It should be evident from the above analysis that the brains of Russian children are not being turned into cabbage but rather into caviar. Soviet schools offer Russian children quality education in reading wherein the mystery of the written and spoken word is revealed. Russian teachers and learners are ever reminded of Ivan Turgenev's admonition, "Take care of our language, our beautiful Russian language."[81]

The beauty, richness, and power of their native language does find creative expression and abiding love in Russian schools. Excellence is the watchword and successful reading by every Russian child is expected. CAN WE AFFORD TO OFFER AMERICAN CHILDREN LESS?

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

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